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BOOKS

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Mr. Fitzgerald Sees the Flapper Through

THE BEAUTIFUL AND DAMNED. By F. Scott Fitzgerald. Charles Scribners Sons.

HOWEVER barren may have been the wise and their old wisdoms, Scott Fitzgerald, at the time when he was writing "This Side of Paradise," found ample comfort in the doings of feckless and brave hearted young. Amory Blaine, like another Playboy, went romancing through a foolish world, kissing innumerable girls between 9 o'clock and midnight, drinking wittily with his fellows from midnight until the milkman brought up the dawn, discarding old loves and dead beliefs like a brisk young snake, who every month might slough off his dry shell for a new shining green skin. Even the breaking of his heart was a sound to be listened to and enjoyed like the rest. Mr. Fitzgerald has in the meanwhile lost none of his alertness in observing the manners and speech of his contemporaries, but he no longer finds any great pleasure in the American scene. Life it seems is now meaningless; the beautiful are damned; the glamour he once saw was only a gauze curtain lowered before the stage to conceal the fact that those twilight nymphs were, after all, only middle aged chorus ladies.

Anthony Patch, who succeeds Amory Blaine as a figure through whom Mr. Fitzgerald may write of himself, is when "The Beautiful and Damned" opens 25, and it is already two years "since irony, the Holy Ghost of this later day," has, theoretically at least, descended upon him. Irony was the final polish of the shoe, the ultimate dab of the clothes brush, a sort of intellectual "There!"—yet at the brink of this story he has as yet gone no further than the conscious stage."

Since the younger generation, as they are commonly called, began finding publishers and appearing on lecture platforms, this word irony has been heard with such frequency that I have begun to wonder just what these young men mean by it. Mr. Fitzgerald invokes it, and Stephen Vincent Benet inscribes it on all his gay banners, and even Donald Ogden Stewart is frequently heard to murmur it between whacks with his buffoon's bladder. And I am a little confused, for clearly they do not mean that faculty which allows one to smile appreciatively when Tragedy enters wearing a propitious mask and speaking equivocal phrases. Their irony is not that good counsellor of Anatole France, who, in smiling, renders life a thing to be loved the more, who rails neither at love nor beauty, who teaches us to mock liars and fools, which we should, without her, be feeble enough to hate. As I say, I am a little uncertain just what these young men mean when they hold themselves to speak ironically. For they have not that superb detachment which would allow them to expose the littleness of their characters without ever seeming themselves to rush in with a measuring rod, their mockery is not dispassionately gay, they cannot allow circumstances to slaughter their heroes without applying a dagger or two with their own hands.

II.

With Mr. Fitzgerald, if one is to judge by his latest book, he means to say that Anthony has found out that life is purposeless, beauty in no way allied with the truth, all effort, even of the intellect, unreasonable. Anthony is, when he is presented to us, a man "aware that there could be no honor and yet had honor, who knew the sophistry of courage and yet was brave." Later, it is true, he turns out to be an arrant coward on occasion and disports himself most dishonorably. Of irony he never either in the beginning nor at the end achieves more than a passing glimpse.

As a matter of fact, Anthony Comstock Patch is a rather futile young man with a pallid skin and dark polished hair, shy enough in his extreme youth to have spent his time among many books without deriving from them either erudition or richness of mind. It is his inherent laziness rather than a fine skepticism which prevents him from ever accomplishing more than a single precious essay toward his volume on the Renaissance Popes. It is his uxoriousness which makes of him a pathetic adjunct to the more vivid Gloria, the thinness of his zest for life which makes him turn, more and more thirstily, toward alcohol. Sophisticated, he is constantly under the illusion that he is rather superior in intellect and character to the persons about him; disillusioned, he is at the mercy of circumstances.

F. Scott Fitzgerald.

In 1913 he is living in an apartment in the Fifties of New York trying to prove that an American can live idly and gracefully on seven thousand a year. He is awakened each morning by a frayed English servant with the exquisitely appropriate name of Bounds; he arises to bathe in his mirrored and crimson carpeted bathroom; he arranges his impeccable toilet and saunters forth to savor life effortlessly. He pays hasty and unwilling visits to his grandfather, Adam J. Patch, once known as a financier who had risen by none too creditable means, now as a reformer employing a retinue of paid moralists. He loafs and invites his soul with two friends—Maury Noble, imperturbably feline, self-consciously superior, animated by an undisguised boredom, and Richard Caramel, a bulgy young novelist, with one brown and one topaz eye, who is destined before he is 30 to have written a number of utterly silly novels which he will believe to be wise.

Comes then into his life one Gloria—as Mr. Fitzgerald with a recently acquired fondness for the D. W. Griffith order of words might well say—"Coast to Coast Gloria," she of the bobbed hair and the many sounding kisses, with lips carmined and sweetly profane, with an enduring taste for gumdrops and swiftly passing fancies for attractive young men. She is Rosalind of "This Side of Paradise" seen through slightly older and less romantic eyes; she is the girl of the Off Shore Pirate portrayed at full length with a more careful treatment of light and shade and more conscious accumulation of detail. Born in Kansas City, Mo., of a Bilphist mother and father engaged in the celluloid business, she has been brought to her twenty-third year in surroundings of inescapable vulgarity. She has the wit to perceive that there is something tawdry in her prettiness; she has not the innate perception of form which would have allowed her to become beautiful. It has obviously been within Mr. Fitzgerald's intention to give her a touch of that immemorial loveliness which is in Donna Rita despite her peasant origin, a suggestion of that power to drive young men wild which was Zuleika Dobson's for all her rococo vulgarity. He has allowed her a sensitiveness to sensuous impressions, a more delicate perception than might be expected from a flapper with a past so monotonous in its promiscuity. Gloria has the hard and solitary will of a child and a child's petulance and vanity. Spoiled, contemptuous, willful, she feels pathetically that somewhere her beauty might have had its due; here she must take whatever adulation comes her way, nor as if the admirer be second rate or worse. The book belongs to her as the earlier volume belonged to Amory Blaine. Not because she is the more vivid character than Anthony but because she is more vividly imagined, more consistently presented. There is something about him that suggests that he has been made out of too many and too discordant bits of observation, like the philosophy of William Blake, which, as T. S. Eliot says, was made out of the odds and ends he happened to find in his pocket.

At their first contact Anthony is stirred from his carefully composed calm and for a while Mr. Fitzgerald returns to his earlier moods to manage their meetings with romance.

"Oh, for him there was no doubt. He had arisen and paced the floor in sheer ecstasy. That such a girl should be; should poise curled in a corner of the couch like a swallow newly landed from a clean, swift flight, watching him with inscrutable eyes. He would stop his pacing and, half shy each time at first, drop his arm around her and find her kiss.

"She was fascinating, he told her. He had never met any one like her before. He besought her jauntily but earnestly to send him away; he didn't want to fall in love. He wasn't coming to see her any more — already she had haunted too many of his ways.

"What delicious romance! His true reaction was neither fear nor sorrow—only this deep delight in being with her that colored the banality of his words and made the mawkish seem sad and the posturing seem wise."

III.

They marry and Mr. Fitzgerald takes up his theme in earnest. He is prepared to show that this disintegration of a young man who, for all his lack of illusion, cannot bear the contact with life, of a girl who for all her hardness of heart cannot gracefully survive the passing of her first youth.

The middle portions of the book are at once too long and too hurried. That is, incidents are presented diverting in themselves which have no bearing on the theme. And in those places where the material presented is essential to the story, the deductions made are too violent, the transitions too abrupt. One is hardly prepared that Anthony should, even under the influence of Gloria, his own idleness and a diminishing income turn so quickly from his pleasant nonchalance to so consistent a dipsomania. Gloria's beauty fades out and her nerves wear thin at a strangely early age.

Yet, taken as a whole, it seems to me that the book represents both in plan and execution an advance on "This Side of Paradise." If, stylistically speaking, it is not so well written, neither is it so carelessly written. The minor characters are admirably foreshortened; the criticism applied to them seems at times unfortunately Menckenian, the art through which they are shown often comes too close to burlesque. The alcoholic interludes are, if frequent, agreeably heady. The humor with which the quarrels of Gloria and Anthony are touched, the satiric description of army life in a Southern conscript camp, Anthony's adventures in bond selling are excellently done, with skill and a fine zest and whips adroitly applied.

In order to arrive at those qualities in Scott Fitzgerald which are valuable it may not be unprofitable to compare him with an Englishman like Aldous Huxley. Both are of an age and both have a gift of wit and phantasy, an eye for the absurdities of their contemporaries. Huxley has erudition, a rich knowledge of contemporary literature, taste even when dealing with the indecencies of life, the attitude of the philosopher even in contemplating a sow and her litter of pigs. But he is exceedingly weary, his grace is that of a man well bred but tired. Whereas Fitzgerald is at the moment of announcing the meaninglessness of life magnificently alive. His ideas are too often treated like paper crackers, things to make a gay and pretty noise with and then be cast aside; he is frequently at the mercy of words with which he has only a nodding acquaintance; his aesthetics are faulty; his literary taste is at times extremely bad. The chapter labeled "Symposium," pictorially good, does not seem clearly thought out or burdened with wisdom. The episode entitled "Flash Back in Paradise" might, except for its wit, have been conceived in the mind of a scenario writer. But these are flaws of vulgarity in one who is awkward with his own vigor. JOHN PEALE BISHOP.

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